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Capitol Hill Spokes Man

When It Comes to Urban Design and 'Livability' Issues, Rep. Earl Blumenauer Isn't Just Spinning His Wheels

By Benjamin Forgey, Washington Post Staff Writer

To negotiate a narrow passageway just outside the office of Democratic Rep. Earl Blumenauer, you have to step around the bicycle leaning against the wall -- a no-frills, off-the-shelf model with a battered black frame.

Blumenauer brought the bike with him on the plane from Oregon five years ago when he was first elected to the House. It has done the congressman a world of good in his short Washington career.

On the most mundane level, the bicycle provides personal transportation. Blumenauer rides it to and from work each day -- a short commute, as he lives in an apartment on Capitol Hill. Sporting plastic bike pins -- fuchsia or chartreuse -- on his lapels, he'll snap on his elastic pants protectors during the day, wheel out the vehicle and pedal off to meetings at the White House or federal offices around town.

Using the bicycle every day also helps him stay in shape, not a negligible benefit in the mind of an intense 53-year-old who insists on running several marathons every year. Blumenauer's long morning runs or bike rides are doubly useful because he dictates speeches and letters on the move. Staff members get used to the choppy rhythm of the tapes.

Right from the start, Blumenauer used his interest in bicycles to widen his circle of political acquaintances on the Hill. Noting that there was a caucus of like-minded members for almost any issue -- but not yet for bikes -- Blumenauer organized the Congressional Bicycle Caucus shortly after he arrived in 1996.

The bicycle, it seems clear, helped Blumenauer escape the plunge into invisibility suffered by most new House members. It is not easy to gain attention as a low-ranking name on a list of 435 publicity-conscious souls, but Blumenauer quickly recognized the potential of becoming the leading member of a congressional biking pack. The caucus is a tripartisan

group, its founder is pleased to point out, that has grown to 82 members -- 60 Democrats, 21 Republicans and one independent.

Yet by far the most potent political function of the bicycle for Blumenauer is its symbolism. As a low-cost, healthy, energy-efficient mode of transportation, the bicycle epitomizes the congressman's all-consuming interest in issues associated with "livability." After only two full terms in the House, Blumenauer, quite remarkably, has become a sort of congressional Mr. Livability.

"Every issue, if it is ever going to take off, needs a champion who is focused and committed, who can walk through walls or walk through fire in order to make something happen," says Daniel S. Wilson, a chief lobbyist for the American Institute of Architects. "And that's what Earl is. He is the Energizer Bunny of livability on Capitol Hill."

With his wiry frame, bike pins, signature bow tie and close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair -- always a bit disheveled -- Blumenauer is the picture of professorial earnestness during his frequent appearances on the House floor or on the livability lecture circuit. He includes a ritual definition of livability early in most of his speeches -- it is

anything that helps "make our families safe, healthy and economically secure."

As this broad language suggests, livability -- often also referred to as "smart growth" or, by environmentalists, as "sustainable growth" -- is more a theme than a single, easily definable issue. Anthony Downs, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has pointed out that it is hard to find anyone openly opposed to something called smart growth -- "since its opposite is 'dumb growth.' " The same might be said of livability. Who, after all, stands tall for unlivability?

For Blumenauer, however, smart growth and dumb growth, livability and unlivability are not vague abstractions. Rather, he believes, they are omnipresent qualities of our everyday lives -- and most citizens can tell the difference between them.

Take the location of post offices, for instance. Would you prefer your local post office to be personably situated on a convenient street near other stores, or somewhere out of town in a big, and possibly more efficient, warehouse-type building?

Blumenauer thinks most people would choose the smaller, ostensibly less efficient post offices -- such convenient services, he says, are "building blocks of a vibrant, small downtown." By contrast, he argues, the U.S. Postal Service's propensity to abandon old, centrally located stations in favor of new, larger buildings on the fringes of towns and cities is "an immense contributor to sprawl or dumb growth."

To give local folks a say in such matters, Blumenauer authored the Post Office Community Partnership Act, a bill that would require the Postal Service to obey local land use laws and consult with local groups when making decisions about locations. "The Postal Service routinely gives people more input into what version of the Elvis stamp it is going to select," Blumenauer routinely points out, "than over something that can have a huge impact on people's lives."

This is modest legislation, indeed -- but it could have a very important, very direct impact on the vitality -- or should we say livability -- of hundreds of American places.

Blumenauer's career in Congress so far has been dedicated to writing or supporting a relentless stream of such modest proposals, and to composing a ceaseless flow of commentary on livability issues. He never seems to miss an opportunity for a C-SPAN moment in the House, and almost always uses it to deliver a spirited discourse on energy conservation, mass transit, mixed-use neighborhoods, affordable housing, historic preservation, farmland retention, open space protection . . . the list could go on and on.

Legislators, even strong livability advocates, characteristically spoon out just one or two topics from the rich stew of available issues. Sen. Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.), for instance, has long been an advocate of safe development of those abandoned, poisoned industrial tracts -- "brownfields" -- that scar many American cities and towns. Finally, this year Chafee's "brownfields" revitalization bill looks as if it has a good chance of becoming law.

Blumenauer is different. He makes it a point to be all over the place. As a relative neophyte in Washington and member of the House minority, Blumenauer knows he lacks the clout to attach his name to a single big legislative program -- a Livability Act of 2001 or some such thing. Probably, he wouldn't want to do it in any case. Huge, catchall federal initiatives are not his thing.

"The customary way of doing federal business hasn't worked," he says. "Every administration since Lyndon Johnson has had some variation of the big urban program -- enterprise zones or whatever it is called -- in which they try to bribe people to invest where they don't want to live."

The congressman's approach to governing is rooted in his home town of Portland, a medium-size city that is close to legendary in livability circles. Blumenauer helped make it that way -- for the better part of a quarter-century before his election to Congress, he was a major player in Portland's politics of livability.

With its growth boundary and a host of other initiatives -- removal of a functioning highway to make a riverside park, mandatory street-level retail stores in its revived downtown, stringent urban design guidelines and many others -- Portland also is a place libertarians, property rights activists and certain conservatives love to hate.

In a 1999 Newsweek column attacking Al Gore for his pro-livability procilivities, conservative columnist George Will quipped that "liberalism is about to suffer an acute case of Portland envy." The growth boundary and other governmental interferences, Will and others argue, have driven up housing prices and decreased housing choices. Furthermore, Portland critics argue, the advantages of the city's alternative transportation policies are minimal at best -- Blumenauer's fellow bike riders, they point out, account for only two percent of Portland commuters.

Blumenauer, for his part, relishes rallying to Portland's defense. Housing costs have risen, he agrees, but Portlanders "have more choice." He also says "studies show that Portland homeowners are more satisfied with their housing than in other cities -- such as Atlanta." And that two percent commuter biking figure, he proudly huffs, "is five times the national average -- despite a terrible biking climate."

"Our aim in Portland," Blumenauer says simply, "was to give people a sense that they belong. We looked at schools, at jobs and at the fabric of the community, and tried to make sure all these things came together to support the quality of life people want." He rates the city's success as "stunning."

Like many activist politicians of his generation, Blumenauer got his start in a battle against a federal highway. In 1970, shortly after graduating from Portland's Lewis and Clark College, Blumenauer enlisted as a foot soldier in the "epic struggle" -- his words, 30 years after the fact -- to stop an interstate freeway from plowing through the city's neighborhoods. Then, in 1972, Blumenauer got himself promoted to the equivalent of lieutenant, at least, by running successfully for the Oregon legislature on a platform of environmental reform. He was 24.

And, as it happened, he was elected at a turning point for Oregon. An unusual coalition of rural Republicans and urban Democrats united to adopt a statewide planning law mandating urban-growth boundaries and other reforms designed to preserve open space and combat sprawl. Among the law's other effects, in Blumenauer's view, was paving the way for Portland's renaissance.

Although he had not yet received his law degree (that came in 1976), Blumenauer distinguished himself in his inaugural term by writing and floor-managing a comprehensive transportation law. Like most states, Oregon followed the federal lead (and federal dollars) in emphasizing road construction almost to the exclusion of other kinds of transportation infrastructure. Blumenauer's law changed that.

In Oregon, after 1973, rails, bike paths, bus lanes, sidewalks, pedestrian bridges -- you name it -- had to be given a fair shake, and connections between different kinds of transportation had to be carefully thought out. Blumenauer's law anticipated by nearly two decades similar reforms in federal policy embodied in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act of 1991 -- a fact the congressman doesn't mind calling attention to.

In 1978 Blumenauer switched from state to local government, getting elected to the Multnomah County Commission. In 1986 he won a seat on Portland's five-member City Council. He lost a bid to become mayor in 1992, but stayed on as a councilman until 1996, when he ran for Congress twice, and won twice.

It was one of those fortunate swerves that politicians are always on the lookout for. After Republican Sen. Bob Packwood had been forced to resign in disgrace, Democratic Rep. Ron Wyden, a fixture in the most urban and most Democratic of the state's five congressional districts, made a run for the Senate in a special election, and won.

Blumenauer, by then a familiar and well-liked figure in Portland (the most populous part of Wyden's 3rd District), veered into the race for the vacant House seat and won. In the fall elections he won again -- his campaign buttons read "Vote Earl, Vote Often" -- and he hasn't been seriously challenged since.

Under Portland's commission form of government, where council members also have executive responsibility for running city departments, Blumenauer's special domains were planning and transportation. He oversaw the downtown's revival and the expansion of the city's light-rail network. His consensus-building style, forged in the anti-freeway struggles, involved getting lots of people together on a regular basis to consider different options for this or that policy decision.

Early in his council days, recalls lifelong friend and political associate Rick Gustafson, Blumenauer realized that people in the neighborhoods didn't know enough about the issues to take on City Hall on anything like an equal footing. Blumenauer's innovative solution was to instigate a course at Portland State University where neighborhood leaders can be schooled at city expense. The result, Gustafson says, ensures Portland "maybe the best-educated population anywhere on transportation and land use issues."

Blumenauer believes this background in local government is perfect for a livability crusader. "The issue," he says, "is driven primarily by what's happening at the neighborhood, local and state levels." As "America's biggest landowner, landlord and employer," the federal government should simply become "a better partner in making communities livable," he says.

In practice, of course, it isn't so simple. Competing interest groups and the government's size and complexity can frustrate even the best intentions. Blumenauer pecks away tirelessly, however.

He is very good at spotting small issues that may have a large symbolic impact. In 1999 Blumenauer

was able to badger the House into providing employees with monthly transit passes for the first time in its history. The subsidy doesn't amount to much -- the pass is worth $21, as compared to a free parking space Blumenauer estimates to be worth about $155.

But it is something for Blumenauer to build, and harp, on -- he's a persistent critic of the inconsistencies in policies regarding the commuting habits of federal employees, policies he believes largely favor the automobile commuter. "Some agencies give away huge amounts of free parking," he notes, "and some charge for it. Some provide $21 for a transit pass, and some $60. How hard would it be for the federal government to just say, 'We are going to be neutral in this'? Not actually to promote transit, but just treat everybody the same."

Blumenauer is at once a nagger and a policy wonk, a potentially tedious combination. But he is a tireless student of his subject, and he uses his knowledge both to persuade and disarm.

Even many opponents appreciate Blumenauer's style and dedication. "We don't always agree with Earl's concepts or what he advocates," says Gary Garczynski, first vice president of the National Association of Home Biulders, "but we've found him always to be accessible and open-minded -- he's a soldier in the fight for sustainable, intelligent growth."

A divorced father of two grown children, Blumenauer is "on a personal level almost antisocial," says boyhood friend Gustafson. "Earl is who he appears to be," says Bill Wyatt, another longtime friend and political associate. "Voters after a while get a sense of that, and so do others, the interest groups and people who influence the political landscape. So, when he advocates alternative transportation, it isn't something he wants you to do but doesn't do himself. He's always been this way. He walks his talk very effectively."

Blumenauer is a highly partisan politician -- the founder, in fact, of the Committee for a Livable Future, a PAC that channeled $145,500 to Democratic congressional candidates in last year's election. At the same time he speaks the language of bipartisanship and even manages to find a certain grim satisfaction in political life in a Republican House under a Republican president.

"I anticipate ironically that the politics of the Bush administration are going to help us," Blumenauer says. "The administration's budget and tax policies haven't left a whole lot of money. These issues of urban form and design, and of federal partnership, are pretty low-cost and high-impact."

So far, however, Blumenauer has not experienced sterling success with his legislative agenda. This does not surprise him, doesn't seem to faze him and certainly doesn't stop him.

This year alone, in addition to the post office bill and measures designed to benefit his Oregon constituents, Blumenauer has introduced or co-sponsored bills aiming to increase the supply of affordable housing, improve high-speed rail transportation, provide federal grants to states for rewriting their basic planning laws, raise tax benefits for land conservation and -- it almost goes without saying -- do something for biking commuters. Notably, all but one of these measures have a Republican or independent sponsor.

Blumenauer is perhaps at his most creative when zeroing in on issues that presidents, party leaders and committee chairmen don't talk about much. Military housing, for instance.

"The U.S. military is the largest manager of infrastructure in the world," Blumenauer points out. "There are something like a third of a million units of military housing, and an amazing number of them are awful. Yet when you think about it, the military gets access to the largest chunk of the budget, it can finance these units at the lowest rate anywhere, the managers don't have to obey any of the ordinary rules and regulations that affect design, and they can court-martial bad tenants. Why shouldn't that lead to the best housing anywhere to be found?"

The stuff-'em-into-barracks era of military housing was out of date the moment Congress decided to abandon universal conscription, Blumenauer reasons, because from that time forward military services had to compete to attract, and keep, competent personnel. And if building sensibly designed communities for our soldiers and their families makes sense as a competitive strategy, he asks, wouldn't it also set a fine example for society as a whole?

The military as an exemplar of affordable housing and livable communities? It'll never happen, cynics would say. Far-fetched and impractical, pragmatists might argue. But it makes mighty good sense, rationalist Blumenauer would doggedly respond.

This is Blumenauer at his unorthodox best, directing attention to a topic most folks simply take for granted and, with a combination of realism and idealism, offering a fresh perspective. In the short run -- and possibly in the long run, too -- this may well turn out to be Blumenauer's most important gift.